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ASIA WATCH

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ASIA WATCH TO INDONESIAN GOVERNMENT: LEAVE EAST TIMORESE DEMONSTRATORS ALONE

The human rights organization Asia Watch today called on the Indonesian Government to ensure that its troops and police do not detain, harass, interrogate or otherwise intimidate those who took part in a peaceful protest in East Timor on Wednesday, January 17.

The demonstration of well over 100 people calling for respect for human rights and the right to self-determination in East Timor took place outside the Hotel Turismo where the American ambassador, John Monjo, was staying. Asia Watch understands that several people were detained and at least three people hospitalized when the Indonesian authorities used force to break up the demonstration. (Rumors that one person was killed have not been substantiated.) Those detained were reportedly released after an appeal from the ambassador, who asked that no one be arrested "in view of the peaceful nature of the demonstration".

Asia Watch is an affiliate of Human Rights Watch

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"We strongly endorse the statement of Ambassador Monjo," said Sidney Jones, director of Asia Watch. "But if the pattern of abuse in East Timor holds, all those who took part in the demonstration will be sought out, interrogated, and perhaps face preventive detention the next time an important visitor comes to Dili. There is no freedom of assembly in East Timor and no freedom of speech."

Three major demonstrations for human rights and self-determination have taken place in East Timor in the last 18 months. One took place at the time of a visit by President Suharto in November 1988; thousands were interrogated and hundreds detained. Just prior to Pope John Paul II's visit in October, dozens more were detained as a preventive measure, but a demonstration took place anyway following the Pope's final mass in the territory. The demonstration last week was apparently the largest so far.

While Asia Watch takes no position on the issue of self-determination for East Timor, Ms. Jones said the East Timorese should have the right to freely express their opinions in a peaceful manner. "Freedom of expression is an internationally recognized human right," she said. "It is high time the Indonesian Government upheld it."